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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces an exercise that aims to facilitate interaction between international and American students, arguing that the best place to facilitate such interaction is in an intercultural communication course. The exercise is primarily aimed at strengthening the abilities of American students, who possess greater host language proficiency and cultural literacy, to interact with their international peers. The exercise proposed in the paper consists of a panel of about four international students engaging in active dialogue with a class. The paper addresses seven questions concerning the exercise: (1) when the exercise should be introduced into the course; (2) what the instructional objectives of the exercise are; (3) who will comprise the panelists; (4) what specific issues will be covered before, during, and after the panel discussion; (5) how the objectives can be evaluated; (6) what are some of the pitfalls to be avoided; and (7) what the logistics should be for conducting the exercise. A 3-item list of useful references for the exercise is offered, as well as a 10-item list of selections for background reading. (NKA)

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ED 389 031

'He ain't Alien, he's my Classmate:'*
An Exercise Facilitating the Interaction between International and American Students in an Educational Context

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I cannot emphasize enough that the focus of this exercise is on the interaction between American and international students in an academic setting or a joint school task situation rather than other types of settings or situations. Being a "veteran" international student myself and having the opportunity to engage in a study investigating a group of twenty Taiwanese graduate students' experiences in adjusting to a Midwest American university, I came to a conclusion: To the majority of these Taiwanese graduate students, the interaction they were involved in with their American peers primarily took place in an educational setting or a joint school task situation. As my personal experience and the evidence from the study have suggested, the process and outcome of our interaction with American peers in an academic setting have their own incomparable significance in our experiences of the host culture. Evidently, in a joint school task situation, the process of such interaction directly impacts on the performance of the task, and thus, the grade earned by the group as a whole and/or each individual group member. Most importantly, the process and outcome of such interaction can exert a vital influence on the student sojourner's self-image as well as his or her psychological and emotional well-being. A substantial number of student sojourners have recounted incidents where their self-images have been seriously challenged or shattered by their unsatisfying performances in the course of their encounters with their American peers in and outside of class. A good many of student sojourners also expressed the frustration and despair they experienced at a group task they co-worked upon with their American peers. Thus, successful communication between American and international students in an educational setting or for a school task is absolutely crucial and meaningful to this particular group of sojourners in the host culture.

Why focus on enhancing "American" students' competence in interacting with international students?

As I stated at the beginning of the paper, this exercise will be presumably conducted in a class comprising primarily of American students. Thus, it is the intercultural communication competence of this group that this exercise mainly aims to enhance. The objective of strengthening the ability of the class members who are themselves international students to deal with their American peers is not the focus of this exercise and should await to be achieved with other activities conducted in the course.

By targeting enhancement of American students' competence in interacting with their international peers, this exercise advocates a reversal of a predominant approach which demands international students to engage in necessary adjustment in order to achieve successful communication with host nationals. It is time that host nationals, or in this case, American students, to either initiate an attempt or match the effort made by their peers from other cultures in adapting themselves in an intercultural encounter. With an advantage over most of their international peers of possessing greater host language proficiency and cultural literacy, American students, with concerted efforts to communicate with international students, can enact a highly rewarding learning process and achieve the best results of interaction between American and international students.

Description of the Exercise

As a way of detailing this exercise, I will address the following seven questions: 1) When should this exercise be introduced into the course? 2) What are the objectives of this exercise? 3) Who will comprise the panelists? 4) What specific issues will be covered before, during and after the panel discussion? 5) How can the objectives be evaluated? 6) What are some pitfalls to be avoided? and 7) What should be the logistics for the conducting of the exercise?

1. When should this exercise be introduced into the course?

I prefer to conduct this exercise during the earlier part of the course for the following two reasons: 1) The exercise will bring home the point for many of the students that intercultural encounters are indeed part of their schooling experience. In some cases, these encounters are taking place without their free will. During group discussion in class or working on a group project outside of class are

Six and a half years ago, each time when I stepped into a classroom, there was this voice echoing in my heart,"I ain't alien, I'm your classmate." It is that voice from which this exercise is brewed.

Introduction

This paper introduces an exercise that aims to facilitate interaction between international and American students. This exercise proposes that a panel of international students will engage in active dialogue with a class comprised primarily of American students. Although this exercise is primarily designed for use in an intercultural communication class, its relevance may reach beyond a class of this nature.

In this paper, I will first discuss the rationale for the exercise. I will then describe the exercise through a question-answer format. Altogether seven questions are addressed. Finally, I will compile a list of possible material that may be assigned for students to read prior to the panel discussion, and a number of helpful background readings for the teacher to acquaint him or herself with the issue at hand.

Rationale for the Exercise

The rationale behind the exercise is twofold in that it responds to the following two questions. First, why does this exercise target the interaction between American and international students in an educational setting, and particularly, a joint school-task-oriented situation? And, why does this exercise primarily aim at enhancing American students' competence when engaging with international students rather than the other way around?

Why focus on the interaction between American and international students in an "educational" setting or a joint school-task-oriented situation?

In the 1992/93 annual census released by the Institute of International Education (Zikopoulos, Sutton & Julian, 1993) reporting on international educational exchange, of the 438,618 international students studying higher education in the United States, 23.5% or 102,855 students resided in the Midwest. The Midwest was a region with the second highest proportion of international students, trailing only to the Northeast region by 1.4% or 6,506 students, but leading the South region by 4.1% or 17,806 students, the Pacific region by 5.1% or 23,724 students, the Southwest region by 13.3% or 58,237 students, and the Mountain region by 19.9% or 86,863 students. In addition, this report indicates that the number of foreign students studying in the United States as a whole as well as in the Midwest has steadily increased since 1959/60. These statistics imply that the possibilities for American students to engage in interaction with international students in an educational setting are high and continue to rise each year.

As the statistics aforementioned have indicated, there is indeed a need for college educators, and, in particular, those from regions or schools with a large international student population, to facilitate interaction between international and American students in academic settings. This is particularly true for situations where American and international students are engaged in a joint school task. As a communication scholar whose interest lies in intercultural, instructional communication, I strongly believe that it is extremely vital to facilitate such interaction in an intercultural communication course. As the primary goal of an intercultural communication course is to equip students with the knowledge and ability to successfully communicate with people from cultures other than their own, it would be ironic if students fail to put into practice what they have learned from the course in their interaction with peers from another culture(s) either in this very class or other classes. As the saying,"Charity begins at home," suggests, it is time for the instructor of an intercultural communication course not to "assume" but to "assure" that this very class dedicated towards learning about intercultural communication will be the first garden where the flower of successful intercultural communication between American and international students blooms.

such examples. Thus, it is absolutely critical for them to know how to interact with international students in an educational context and particularly at a joint school task situation. Hopefully, the understanding that intercultural communication is integral to their school-related experience will serve as another incentive to master the subject matter taught in this class. In other words, by introducing this exercise during an earlier part of the course, students can apply what they have learned and are about to learn in the course to facilitate their interaction with classmates or group members from other cultures

2) Another advantage of conducting the exercise early in the course is that it provides the teacher with a chance to possibly evaluate students' performances on the affective and behavioral dimensions. These dimensions can often only be evaluated during the time beyond the exercise. For more discussion about the evaluation of these objectives, please see the reply to question number 5.

2. What are the instructional objectives of this exercise?

instructional objectives within the cognitive dimension:

a) Identify the myths or stereotypes American students have of international students regarding their role and performance as students.

b) Identify the difficulties or problems international students have in class or at a joint school task situation outside of class

c) Identify the norms or practices that are specific to an American classroom and those that are unique in an educational setting in other cultures.

d) Analyze student-student and student-teacher role relationships in American as well as other cultures.

e) Analyze the differences between American and other cultures in their student-student and student-teacher communication styles.

f) Analyze the reasons behind the difficulties or problems international students experience in class or at a joint school task situation outside of class.

instructional objectives within the affective dimension:

a) Emphasize with the feelings or emotions international students experience in class or in a joint school task situation outside of class.

b) Appreciate the contribution international students have made in whatever ways to the class or group.

instructional objectives within the behavioral dimension:

a) Demonstrate the verbal and/or nonverbal behaviors that show support for international students in class or at a joint school task situation outside of class.

b) Demonstrate the verbal and/or nonverbal behaviors that can facilitate the interaction with international students in class or at a joint school task situation outside of class.

c) Demonstrate the verbal and/or nonverbal behaviors that can help ease the difficulties or mitigate the problems international students experience in class or at a joint school task situation outside of class.

3. Who will comprise the panelists?
In the process of recruiting the panelists, the teacher is encouraged to adopt the following principles:
panelists to be recruited and organized by the teacher
To ensure that the panelists do meet a set of criteria, which are to be discussed next, the teacher should take charge in recruiting and organizing the panelists.

criteria of the panelists
a) nationality of the panelists
Preferably, the panel will include students from both Asian and Western (preferably non-English-speaking) countries so that students will be exposed to a variety of perspectives from international students on their experiences of studying at an American institute of higher education. Hopefully, the diversity of the experiences shared by the panelists will preclude students from perceiving international students as a monolithic group.

b) number of panelists
A number of four would suffice. With a number smaller than that, the variety of the cultural backgrounds represented by the panelists will be restricted.

c) academic levels and majors of the panelists
Ideally, the panel will comprise of international students at both undergraduate and graduate levels and from various disciplines.

d) verbal ability of the panelists
It is unnecessary for the panelists to speak perfect or American-like English. However, it is preferable if they are equipped with an adequate level of English competence, particularly in their listening comprehension and speaking ability.

sources where the panelists can be recruited
The following are a number of possible sources where international students can be reached:
a) international students in the other class(es) taught by the instructor
I do not encourage the teacher to invite the international students, if any, to be the panelists in their own class for the reason that there can be too much at stake for these students to recount their experiences of interacting with their American peers. And, for the same exact reason, they likely would withhold certain information that may endanger their relationships with the rest of the class. The teacher, however, can encourage these international class members, while not on the panel, to share their experiences during the panel discussion.

b) international graduate students in the department

c) international student organizations on campus

d) international clubs on campus

e) international student affairs' office

f) graduate residence halls which usually comprise a substantial number of international graduate students

a note to be made in the process of recruiting the panelists
When the international student who is contacted shows an interest in sharing his or her experience but is uncomfortable with the idea of engaging in face-to-face interaction with American students, the teacher can provide the student with the following two options: 1) being videotaped and having the videotape later played to the class immediately before the panel discussion begins, and 2) being

audio taped and having the audio taped message compiled into an excerpt that can be treated as part of the reading material assigned to the class prior to the panel discussion.

With the consent from the student, the videotape so produced can be used at other events or occasions, such as international students' orientations or TA's training workshops.

4. What specific issues will be covered before, during and after the panel discussion?

questions to be discussed by students prior to the panel discussion

a) What are some common characteristics of college classroom learning that you have experienced?

b) What difficulties or problems have you experienced in and outside of class in college?

c) What are the myths, stereotypes or impressions often associated with international students regarding their role and performance as students or class members?

Students' answers to these questions can be compiled into a handout and distributed to the class at the beginning of the class in which the panel discussion takes place. The purpose of the handout will be addressed in the discussion of question number 7.

questions to be discussed by the panelists

a) What are some differences (norms or/and practices) that commonly exist between an American classroom environment and a classroom environment in your home culture?

b) What difficulties or problems do/did you encounter in or outside of class that are/were related to your learning in the host educational environment?
How do/did these difficulties or problems make you feel as a student and/or class member in or outside of class?

c) Why are/were there such difficulties or problems?

d) How do/did you deal with these difficulties or problems?

e) In what ways do you think these difficulties or problems can/could be alleviated or eliminated particularly with the help of your American classmates?

questions to be discussed by students subsequent to the panel discussion:

a) What perplexity or misconceptions you or other people had towards international students has this panel discussion aided to clarify or rectify?

b) What are the difficulties or problems regarding the panelists' learning experiences in and outside of class?
How do you categorize them?
In what ways are they similar to or different from those mentioned by the class?

c) What are the impacts of these difficulties or problems on the panelists?

d) What are the norms or practices that are specific in an American classroom?
In what ways are they different from the norms or practices that exist in the educational setting in some other cultures as discussed by the panelists?

e) What are the differences in student-student and student-teacher relationships between American and some other cultures as discussed by the panelists?

f) What are the differences between American and some other cultures as discussed by the panelists in student-student and student-teacher communication styles?

g) With regard to the difficulties or problems addressed by the panelists, what can you do as a class or group member to alleviate or eliminate some of the difficulties or problems, both as they have mentioned and as what we have learned in this course at this point may have suggested?

5. How can the objectives be evaluated?

The word "evaluated" in this case does not necessarily mean that a grade needs to be assigned to students for their performances in achieving objectives within the cognitive, affective and behavioral dimension. In fact, it is preferable not to attach a grade directly to students' performances in these aspects so that when an attitudinal or behavioral change is observed by the teacher or reported by the student, it is more likely a genuine change. In addition, the elusive nature and limited opportunities to evaluate the class' performances regarding the affective and behavioral objectives, in this case, can make assignment of a grade if not impossible at least undesirable.

Although not directly connecting students' performances regarding these objectives to the grading scheme of the course, the teacher can conduct an informal and nevertheless informative assessment of the class' performances with regard to these objectives in the classes subsequent to the panel discussion until the end of the course. There are multiple channels through which the teacher can solicit evidence displaying students' achievement of these objectives, and they are as follows:

<u>evaluation of the objectives within the cognitive dimension</u>

With regard to the objectives within the cognitive dimension, how well the questions are answered by students during the class discussion following the panel presentation can serve as a general indication of the extent to which these objectives are achieved. Any verbal or written comment made by students later in the course that can be perceived as an answer to any of the questions earlier posed is another credible indication of achievement of these objectives.

<u>evaluation of the objectives in the affective and behavioral dimension</u>

With regard to the objectives in the affective and behavioral dimension, the teacher can observe the interaction between American and international students, if any, in class, and in particular, during group discussions. If there is a joint task assigned, the teacher can ask each member of the class to keep a working log in which the interaction among the group members is recorded. If students, by this point, are already required to keep a personal journal as a regular assignment, the teacher can certainly remind class members of entering in their journals accounts of their interaction with classmates from other cultures either in this or other classes they are currently taking. When the working log or the personal journal is designed to be a graded assignment, they should not be specifically graded on the extent to which the objectives of this exercise are met. They should, instead, be graded on more general evaluation criteria, such as "an in-depth reflection of the readings and class discussions." This is a point that needs to be made clear to the class when the assignment is first given.

6. What are some pitfalls to be avoided?

To prevent the exercise from being wrongly received by American students, I would like to call attention to a number of pitfalls that should be avoided particularly at the time when the panel discussion is conducted.

<u>preventing the panel discussion from being turned into a debate</u>

Because of the variety in the cultural backgrounds and other personal attributes of the panelists recruited, it is likely that their experiences as international students in an educational setting may

differ to some degree. Thus, it is important for the teacher to explain to the panelists prior to the panel discussion that it is only natural if their experiences do vary to some extent and there is no need for them to be contentious of these differences.

avoid tainting the panel discussion with an "us versus them" atmosphere
Due to the nature of the questions to be discussed, differences between American and the panelists' home cultures or between the experiences of American students and those of international students are likely to be highlighted during the panel discussion. The panelists, however, should be cautioned not to make remarks that will clearly suggest to the class an "us versus them" stance with international students being "us" and American students "them." Situating their experiences in specific contexts and staying away from sweeping statements or polarizing comments are useful guidelines to follow.

Another preventive measure that can help avoid leaving an "us versus them" impression on the class is through the seating arrangement. The teacher should arrange the class into a circle and seat the panelists in the circle with American students in a somewhat mixed fashion. So if unfortunately there are sporadic comments tainted with an "us versus them" tone, the visual effect created by this seating arrangement may function to tune it down.

avoid generalizing the experiences mentioned in the panel discussion to a particular student sojourner group or the whole international student population
Although certain experiences addressed by the panelists may be commonly shared by other international students, the class should be cautioned not to generalize the information they gathered at the panel discussion to a particular cultural group or the entire body of international students. The point of having the panel discussion is not to provide the class with an idea that a quick and easy recipe for interaction is possible with a homogeneous and static population of international students. Because if so, generalization and essentialization will be the most efficient tools during such encounters. The essence of having the panel discussion is, instead, to make the class become aware of "some" cultural differences as they are manifested in an educational setting and how they can interact with peers who have different experiences as a student both in the past and present. Since this exercise only demarcates the beginning of an on-going learning process the class will be engaged in, to prevent students from halting such a learning process, the teacher should caution students not to make swift generalizations. Instead the teacher should prepare students for encounters with differences and variation as they interact with their peers from other cultures.

7. What should be the logistics for the conducting of the exercise?
As the discussion of question number 3 may have suggested, the logistics for the conducting of the exercise can indeed be broken down into three temporal phases, i.e., before, during and after the panel discussion.

before the panel discussion
Adequate preparation is undoubtedly the key to the success of the panel discussion. When properly prepared, the panelists are able to address the issues of interest in an informative and well-balanced fashion. When properly prepared, class members are able to learn most effectively from the panel discussion.

process of preparing the panelists
The teacher should arrange a time for all the panelists to meet and get acquainted with one another. While some of the issues may have been brought up when the teacher first contacts the panelists, at the meeting they will be discussed at greater length. These issues include:
a) the composition of the class including the size of the class and the cultural background and academic level of the majority of students in class.
b) the objectives hopefully to be achieved by this exercise

c) the issues of interest to be addressed in the panel discussion
The teacher should encourage the panelists to start sharing some of their experiences at the meeting. This will not only give the teacher a chance to ensure that the panelists do understand the direction at which discussion is aimed, but also help the panelists better acquaint themselves with one another prior to the panel discussion.
The teacher should also caution the panelists to avoid some of the pitfalls as discussed in question number 6.
d) the length and format of the panel discussion

process of preparing the class
a) Have the class discuss questions, that are labeled, "question to be discussed by students prior to the panel discussion," under question number 4. As previously mentioned, students' answers to these questions should be compiled into a handout and distributed to students right before the panel discussion begins.
b) Assign reading/video material to the class prior to the panel discussion. With proper material assigned to students before the panel discussion is conducted, their interest in the panel discussion can be aroused or enhanced. Both the questions and the reading/video material will assist class members in tuning into the panel discussion more quickly and grasping the points made by the panelists more effectively. For a list of possible readings and video materials, see the discussion under "useful references."

Immediately before the panel discussion begins, the teacher should pass out a handout compiled beforehand of students' answers to a group of questions the instructor has the class discuss prior to the panel discussion. Meanwhile, the teacher should urge the class to make note of any point brought up by the panelists that are related, in whatever fashion, to the answers or responses listed on the handout. In general, the teacher should encourage the class to take notes during the panel discussion particularly of points regarding cultural differences as they are manifested through the panelists' learning experiences both in their home and host culture.

<u>during the panel discussion</u>
The role of the teacher during the panel discussion is primarily that of a moderator who regulates the time and assures a smooth progression of the discussion.

<u>after the panel discussion</u>
There should be a question-answer session immediately following the panel discussion. To ensure a smooth progression of the discussion, questions from the class regarding issues addressed by the panelists should be reserved until the question-answer session. This is a good time for the teacher to raise questions concerning any critical issues that are left undiscussed by the panelists.

When the panel discussion is over, the teacher should extend his or her gratitude and appreciation to each panelist. If time allows, the teacher can sit down with the panelists and listen to their experiences of the exercise. Just as every possible effort has been made to ensure that the class can gain the most from this exercise, every possible effort should be made to ensure that the panelists can also find this exercise a rewarding experience.

To tie together the questions students discuss and the reading/video material they preview prior to the panel discussion and the information presented by the panelists, a post-panel-discussion should be conducted. The teacher will have the class answer questions -- those labeled as "questions to be discussed by students subsequent to the panel discussion" listed under question number 4. The nature of the questions will not only assist the class to organize the information they have gathered throughout the whole exercise but also upgrade their learning in the cognitive dimension from the knowledge and comprehension level to the application, analysis and synthesis level.

Useful References for the Exercise

possible material assigned to the class

Linhart, C. (Spring, 1995). Lack of communication in American classroom. Passport: Office of International Student Affairs Newsletter. IL: The University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign.

McCroskey, J. C. & Richmond, V. P. (1991). *Quiet children and the classroom teacher.* Bloomington, ID: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills & Annandale, VR: Speech Communication Association. (In particular, pp. 10-15, 22-26)

Tobin, J., Wu, D., Davidson, D. (1989). *Preschool in Three Cultures: Japan, China, and the United States.* [film]. Fourth Wave Productions. (the location of the publisher is unclear).

A list of complied excerpts from my interviews with Taiwanese graduate students

helpful background readings for the teacher

Farhady, H. (1982). Measures of language proficiency from the learner's perspective. *TESOL Quarterly, 16 (1),* 43-59.

Greenall, G. M. & Price, J. E. (Eds.) (1980). *Study modes and academic development of overseas students.* London: The British Council.

Hoff, B. L. R. (1979). *Classroom-generated barriers of learning: International students in American higher education.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, U.S. International University.

Hull, W. F., IV. (1978). *Foreign students in the United States of America: Coping behavior within the educational environment.* New York, NY: Praeger Publishers.

James, K. (1975). Overseas students' listening problems: An inquiry. *Spoken English 8,* 97-106.

Liberman, K. (1994). Asian student perspectives on American university instruction. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 18 (2),* 173-192.

McCroskey, J. C. & Richmond, V. P. (1991). *Quiet children and the classroom teacher.* Bloomington, ID: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills & Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association.

Mestenhauser, J. A., Marty, G., & Steglitz, E. (Eds.). (1988). *Culture, learning, and the disciplines: Theory and practice in cross-cultural orientation.* Washington, DC: National Association for Foreign Student Affairs.

Robertson, D. L. (1983). *English language use, needs, and proficiency among foreign students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Zikopoulos, M., Sutton, E., & Julian, A. (1993). *Open doors, 1992-1993: Report on international education exchange.* New York: Institute of International Education.

Conclusion

With an increasing influx of international students to American institutes of higher education, it is time that we educators adequately prepare our students to successfully interact and communicate with these student sojourners in the educational setting. By doing so, the best possible learning outcomes for both parties will be yielded.

This paper introduces an exercise that aims to achieve this goal. Judging by the details discussed previously, this exercise is adorned with no fancy, showy sparkles. In fact, it may very likely remind you of "something similar" to an ad you skimmed over in the campus newspaper about a panel discussion between American and international exchange students on their cultures and the way they live. Or it may bring your memory back to "something similar" you read in an article on an orientation program for in-coming international students that suggests a panel discussion on American classroom culture take place. However, when you compare this exercise with that "something similar" you came across before on the content of the panel discussion, the setting

where it is conducted, and the audience on which it targets, you will realize that while this exercise and that "something similar" may share a lot of common parts, the manner in which these parts are put together is anything but similar. In fact, that is exactly the point this exercise attempts to make, and that is, as I believe, also the merit of this exercise.

> *Remember that voice I mentioned at the beginning of this paper? With the help of this exercise, I hope that voice can vanish from the hearts of some international students who have the same feeling as I did, six and a half years ago. With the help of this exercise, I hope a new voice will emerge in the hearts of some American students,"He ain't alien, he's my classmate." **

* The title of the paper is adapted from a song lyric, "he ain't heavy, he's my brother." It is not intended to be a sexist remark.

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Farhady, H. (1982). Measures of language proficiency from the learner's perspective. *TESOL Quarterly, 16 (1),* 43-59.

Greenall, G. M. & Price, J. E. (Eds.) (1980). *Study modes and academic development of overseas students.* London: The British Council.

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